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SUBJECT: ECUADOR AVIAN FLU PREPARATIONS AND DEMARCHE RESPONSE

REF: A. STATE 92335

¶1. (U) Summary: The GOE has given considerable thought to the risks of avian flu and has programs for prevention and crisis response. GOE representatives expressed interest in attending the Ministerial Conference on October 25-26 in Egypt, but expressed concerns that funding limitations will not allow them to do so. End summary.

¶2. (U) On October 3, Econoffs delivered reftel points regarding the upcoming Ministerial Conference on October 25-26 to representatives from the Ecuadorian Ministry of Health, along with representatives from the Ecuadorian Agricultural Health Service (SESA), the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), and the poultry industry organization, CONAVE. The meeting participants briefed Econoffs on GOE preparations for a future avian flu crisis.

GOE PREPARATIONS: PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

¶3. (U) The GOE has attempted to come up with inter-agency plans for prevention of an avian flu outbreak, as well as preparations for the legal, health, diagnostic, and communication aspects of an outbreak should it occur. The prevention side of GOE planning has focused on raising industry awareness and implementing safety regulations, as well as banning poultry-related imports from countries that have suffered avian flu outbreaks in the past. Industry officials said that poultry consumption in Ecuador fell by 25% after the outbreaks in 2005, which has led them to promote aggressively awareness of the risks.

¶4. (U) The GOE is attempting to implement standardized production controls on small and medium producers, since the GOE feels that large producers already follow appropriate sanitary practices. They noted, however, that there is little they can do to enforce sanitary regulations among the many "backyard producers" of poultry. The GOE also attempts to monitor wetlands and other areas populated by migratory birds in an attempt to identify outbreaks. They perform bird censuses among domestic birds, and enlist the help of hunting groups for monitoring outbreaks among wild birds. They lament an overall lack of funding for their programs, however.

¶4. (U) For crisis response, the Ministry of Public Health has laboratories, hospital rooms, and protective suits dedicated to any potential outbreak. Ministry officials stated that they attempted to be "epidemiologically vigilant" in monitoring flu outbreaks. They were working with hospitals to promote readiness for a larger crisis, but noted that most facilities lacked sufficient equipment like respirators to be able to respond to a major pandemic.

CONFERENCE IN EGYPT

¶5. (SBU) Meeting participants expressed interest in attending the

conference in Egypt, but expressed concern that funding difficulties might prevent any GOE representatives from attending. They noted that the attendees would probably be from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but added that the MFA was not well-informed about avian flu issues. Econoff followed up with the Director General for Multilateral Affairs at the MFA, who sent a reply on October 23rd saying that the GOE was trying to arrange for someone from the Ecuadorian mission in Egypt to attend the conference.

Comment

16. (SBU) Despite the GOE's well-articulated plans for crisis response, Econoffs have doubts about the ability of the government to mount a coherent response to a major outbreak. The resources in laboratories and hospitals are "dedicated" in name only, and are used for other activities as needed. Although the representatives at the meeting appeared fully aware of the seriousness of the avian flu threat, it was unclear how much this has penetrated into other elements of the GOE.

Hodges